

Teaching controversial issues and developing citizenship among students

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Abstract

The New Zealand Curriculum (2007) puts forward the goal of promoting lifelong learning. A teacher may work as mediator to facilitate this goal by providing students opportunities to explore issues which relate to society and real life experiences. Teaching and discussing controversial issues is an essential element for the development of citizenship education (Misco, 2012). Citizenship education may be defined as teaching students to be critical thinkers, engage and participate in matters concerning society (Chikoko, Gilmour, Harber & Serf, 2011). Simply discussing controversial issues in the classroom we can begin to develop these skills. However 'what is a controversial issue' is subject to change largely due to the wider context in which a school may lie (Misco, 2012). Teachers play a crucial role in citizenship education and how controversial issues may be addressed within the classroom (Moore, 2012). Recent studies have shown teachers understand the importance of teaching controversial issues. Yet, many feel uncomfortable and ill-equipped to effectively address these issues within the classroom (Byford, Lennon & Russell, 2009) resulting in a loss of opportunity to develop citizenship among students (Byford et al 2009).

Keywords: *teaching, citizenship, controversial issues, education*



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Introduction

A controversial issue may be seen as an issue in which there is no universal or definite held point of view. These issues commonly divide groups, as one group may offer a conflicting explanation or conclusion. This could be regarding who is responsible for an issue or conflict arisen; how a problem may be resolved; what action should be taken (Chikoko et al., 2011). People may often feel personally connected with these issues and emotionally tied to such topics (Misco, 2012). The role a teacher plays when addressing issues such as these is pivotal. Conducting classroom discussions surrounding controversial issues is a skill that requires attention and practice (Chikoko et al., 2011). Chikoko et al. (2011), Byford et al. (2009), Barton and McCully (2007) speak to the value of teachers facilitating these conversations in a healthy way. Teachers need to be aware of the influential role they have (Hattie, 2013). Commonly it is seen that many teachers feel they lack the skills to conduct these types of discussions. In some cases teachers also fear the impact of addressing such issues may have upon their careers (Byford et al., 2009). In addition to this due to time constraints the demands of assessment and qualifications citizenship and

addressing controversial issues effectively becomes side-lined (Byford et al., 2009).

Naturally Social Sciences tends to be the curriculum area that commonly addresses controversial issues. However controversial issues are not exclusive to the Social Sciences (Byford et al., 2009). Barton and McCully (2007) focus on teaching controversial issues in history. However the recommendations they provide for teachers when addressing controversial issues; dealing with emotion, mixing it up and finding support; may be applied to other curriculum areas (Barton & McCully, 2007). Moore (2012) also addresses the role in which a teacher plays. By creating a classroom environment based on trust and harmony it may better facilitate the process of addressing controversial issues (Moore, 2012). Therefore, how a classroom environment is set up may help facilitate the discussions of controversial topics (Moore, 2012). Teachers should set an example of the type of behaviour they expect and allowing the expression and safety to discuss such topics in a healthy way (Byford et al., 2009). Furthermore, it highlighted the importance of teachers having knowledge of their wider communities beliefs, values and history (Barton & McCully, 2007).

Schools role in citizenship

Citizenship education is seen as the providing young people with the skills, knowledge, and understanding that will allow them to participate in public life (Chikoko et al., 2011). Citizenship within school curriculum will provide students with opportunity to understand and learn their rights and responsibilities as active citizens (Chikoko et al., 2011). By incorporating controversial issues as a part of citizenship education, students are able to consider a wide range of political, social, ethical and moral problems related closely to real life and society (Chikoko et al., 2011). Much of the literature reviewed highlights the value of learning such skills and knowledge. If school places an importance on citizenship education it will make the implementation of such programmes in the classroom easier (Chikoko et al., 2011).

A school can often be seen as a reflection of society. Therefore encouraging students to be active participants at school can be highly beneficial (Barton & McCully, 2007). However addressing controversial issues and teaching citizenship cannot be up to the teacher and school alone. Chikoko et al., (2011) make note of a growing neo-liberal ideology that can greatly influence curriculum and pedagogy. A teacher must be aware of outside influences such as these before deciding to address controversial issues and citizenship. Misco (2012) puts forward the idea that schools should challenge local traditions. By developing skills such as critical thinking and decision making we are able to begin to challenge traditions, which may be viewed as controversial. However it is important that students are well informed and considerate.

Creating life-long learners

Life-long learners as defined by the New Zealand Curriculum are “literate and numerate critical and creative thinkers, active seekers, users, and creators of knowledge informed decision makers” (M.o.E, 2007). This is closely aligned with the concept of citizenship education. Barton and McCully (2007) suggest that students who regularly take part in classroom discussions about controversial issues are usually more likely to maintain an active role in discussion making throughout their life. Simply by discussing controversial issues citizenship becomes able to be implemented in schools. However as alluded to in much literature the community and wider societal influences can make this simple task difficult to execute successfully (Misco, 2012). Hence the importance of working alongside the community and having an understanding of their beliefs, may assist with the overall success of a citizenship programme in schools (Moore, 2012).

Experience and interactions can be a powerful and meaningful way to engage in education (Eisenstein, 1982). Working with the community with regard to controversial issues and citizenship can be a powerful and meaningful tool (Chikoko et al., 2011). Although it appears teachers may fear teaching controversial issues. By working in collaboration with parents and the wider community can be key in ensuring its success for developing citizenship. Eisenstein (1982) highlights the concept teaching controversial topics could contribute to a change in education purposes and practices. This change has the potential to have a ripple like effect, as students will have the potential to be able to act as informed agents of change (Eisenstein, 1982). Addressing controversial issues can provide the much needed

skills to make citizenship education meaningful (Barton & McCully, 2007).

Future areas of research

Future areas of research could include a New Zealand specific approach to controversial issues and effective pedagogy. A multi-cultural country such as New Zealand must take into account the diversity among students when addressing such topics. Although many teachers agree in the importance of citizenship and addressing controversial issues. There must be support for teachers through this process. Also we must create and maintaining strong community ties by addressing such issues effectively.

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